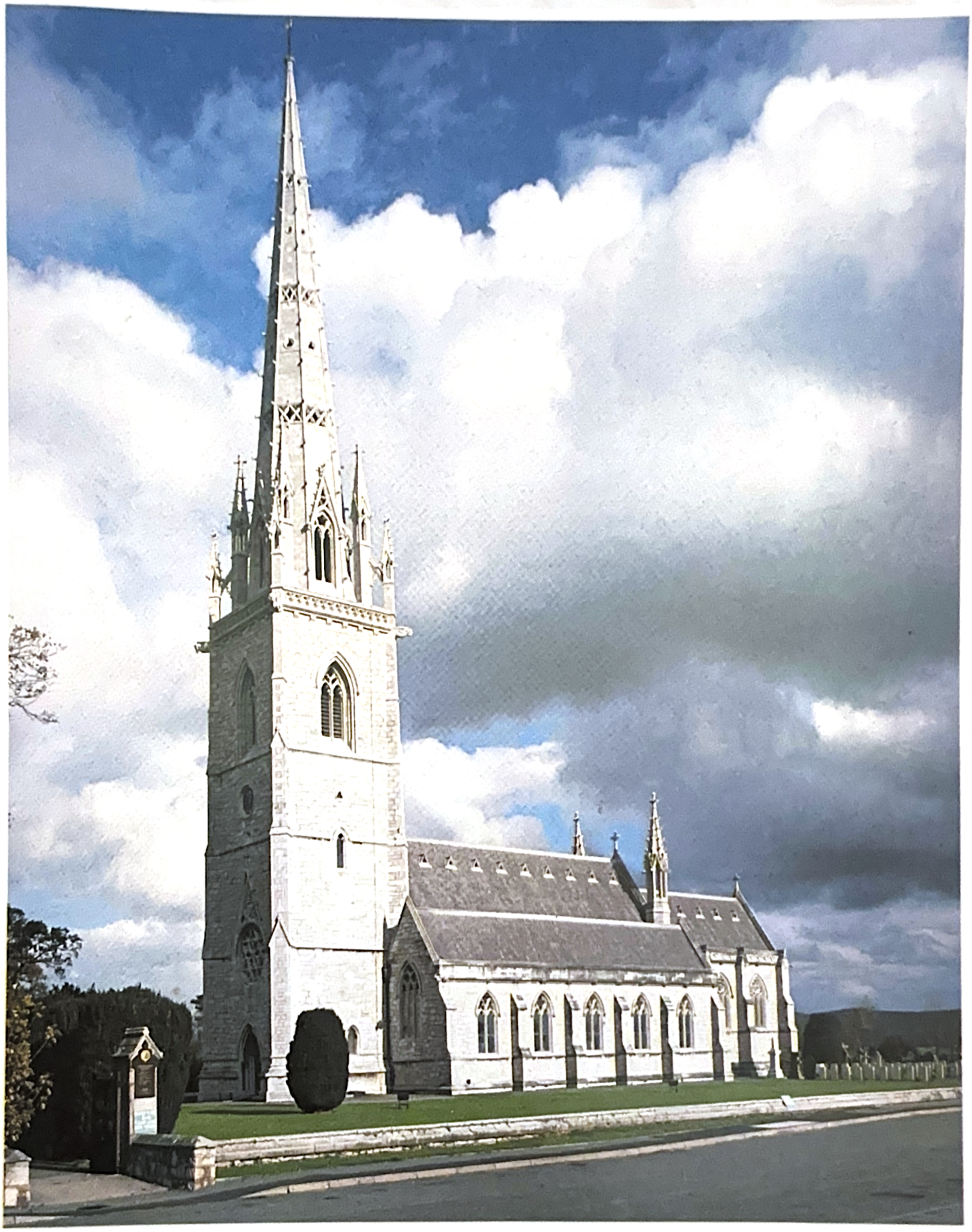
St Margaret's, Bodelwyddan



The Marble Church

AFTER
THIS MANNER
PRAY YE
OUR
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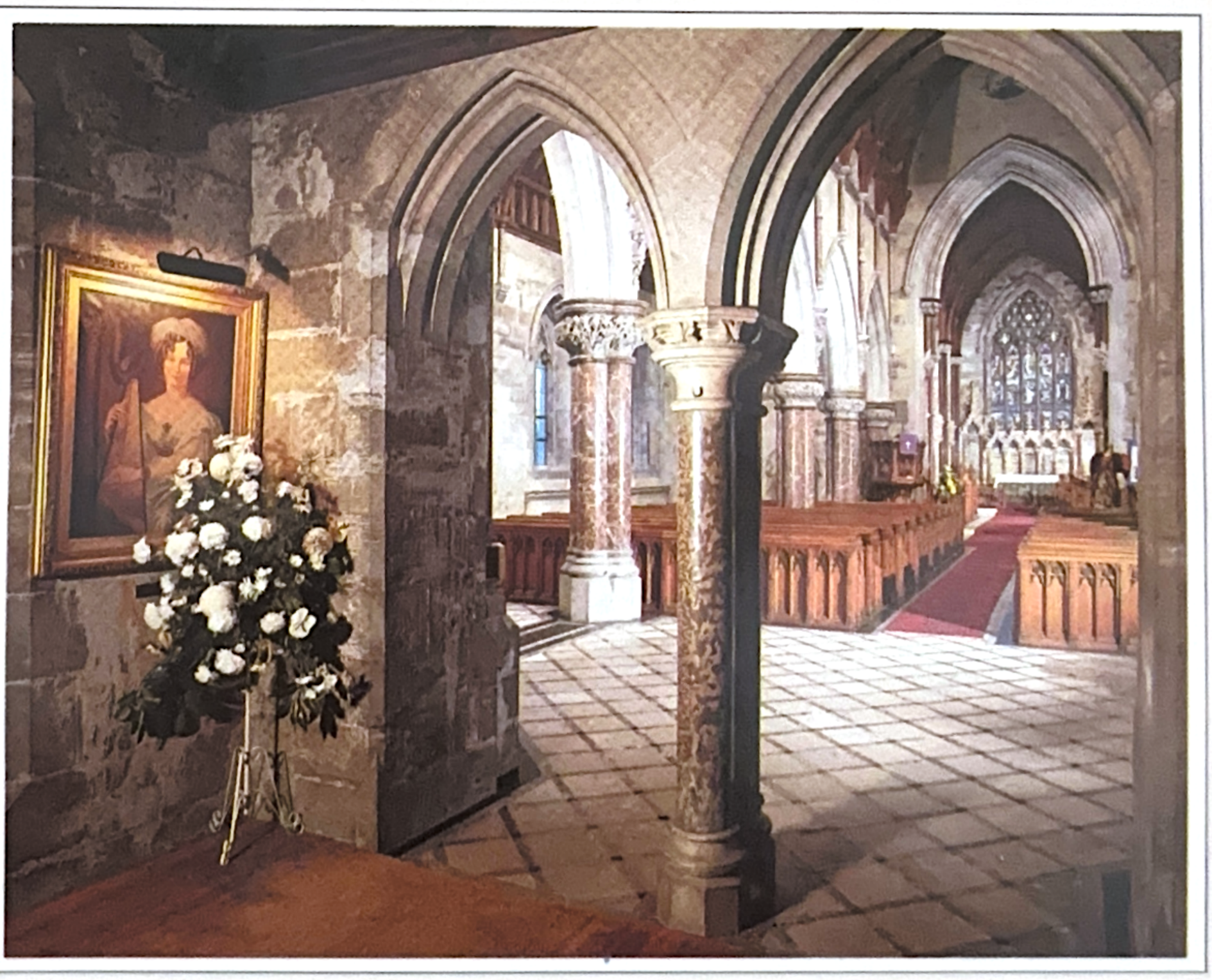
Introduction

When it was first built St Margaret's Church, Bodelwyddan was often referred to as the 'Pearl of the Vale', but nowadays it is more popularly known as the 'Marble Church' on account of the varieties of marble used in its interior construction.

This finely ornate church took just over four years to build and the total cost was £60,000.

There is an amazing richness of design about the church, and some of the carving could not be equalled today.

Left: *chancel and sanctuary*
Below: *porch and entrance with portrait of Lady Margaret Willoughby de Broke*



How it came to be built

In the seventeenth century, Dr Hugh Williams of Nantanog in Anglesey had a brilliant son, William, who read Law at Jesus College, Oxford and was called to the Bar at Gray's Inn. William had a reputation for being a tough, able lawyer. He became Recorder of Chester, which city he represented in two Parliaments, and he sat afterwards for the Borough of Beaumaris and for the County of Caernarvon. During the two last short Parliaments of Charles II, he was Speaker of the House of Commons and then Solicitor General to James II, when it fell to his lot to lead the unsuccessful prosecution of the seven Bishops in 1688.

In 1700 at the age of sixty-six years, he died in his Chambers in Gray's Inn and was buried at Llansilin, near Oswestry.

William married Margaret, daughter of Sir Watkin Kyffin, a rich landowner of North Wales, and from this union was founded the flourishing families of Wynnstay, Penbedw and Bodelwyddan. His elder son, Sir William, founded the Williams family at Pendbedw and Wynnstay, and his younger son, John, who was an eminent Chester lawyer, was great grandfather of Sir John Williams, the first baronet of Bodelwyddan. (The name Bodelwyddan means 'Abode of Elwydan'. Elwydan was a late fifth-century Chieftain, a younger brother of Cyndrwyn, Prince of that part of ancient Powys which included the Vale of Severn about Shrewsbury, and it is believed that Elwydan did live in this district bearing his name.)

In 1829, Margaret, the third daughter of Sir John Williams, married Henry Peyto, sixteenth Baron Willoughby de Broke of Compton Verney, Warwickshire, and after the Baron's death in 1852, Lady Margaret returned to Wales with a keen desire to see Bodelwyddan created into a parish separate from that of St Asaph and having a lovely parish church of its own, and this to serve as a fitting memorial to her husband. Her wishes met with the ready approval of Dr Vowler Short, Bishop of St Asaph.

In the negotiations with the Church Commissioners leading to the creation of the parish and in her resolve to build the new church, Lady Margaret had the enthusiastic support of her brother Hugh, who succeeded to the Bodelwyddan baronetcy in 1858.

The Architect

In Sir Hugh's diaries we read that throughout 1855 the brother and sister visited a number of churches of contemporary building and did not deem any to be worthy of being completely reproduced. So at the end of that year, John Gibson was commissioned to submit his design for the church. John Gibson was originally articled as a pupil to a Mr Hansom, Architect of the Town Hall of Birmingham, and on 25 June 1836 he became a pupil of Sir Charles Barry, probably the greatest English architect since Wren. John Gibson was Barry's only pupil and served with him for nine years. He was largely employed at this time with his master on the details of the new House of Commons, and both master and pupil went together when the

Left: *hammer-beam roof*
Above: *carvings on the chancel arch, from left to right: Sir Henry Peyto Willoughby de Broke, an angel, Lady Margaret Willoughby de Broke*

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NOT NEITHER DO THEY

Left: *Burne-Jones window in the chancel*
Above: *rose window above the vestry*
Right: *family window by T.F. Curtis*
Bottom right: *West Window by Michael O'Connor*

designs for the Houses of Parliament were explained to King William IV. During the time he served Barry, John Gibson worked with a number of capable architects, such as A. Welby Pugin, George Valliamy and Charles Ainslie, and the influence of Barry and also of Pugin are evident in Gibson's work. When he commenced his own practice Gibson had a most successful career, and of his construction of churches, that of St Margaret's, Bodelwyddan, is regarded as his principal work. Whilst still with Barry in 1844 Gibson won the competition for the National Bank of Scotland, the Stock Exchange, etc. at Glasgow.

Lady Willoughby de Broke and Sir Hugh Williams, who for some years lived in Warwickshire, came to know of Gibson because of his work in restoring large country houses in that county, including that of Compton Verney. Gibson later became a Gold Medallist of the Royal Institute of British Architects and was at one time Vice-President of that noble institution. Both the brother and sister were so generous in their support that John Gibson was not hampered in any way, either in the supply of materials, or of skilled labour, when he built St Margaret's.

The Church

The church is built mainly of native limestone, quarried and dressed by men recruited from North Wales, particularly from Anglesey. In

1855, Sir Hugh Williams took great pains in finding and purchasing the necessary oak timber for the construction of the new church; the major portion of the oak came from Middlehill, Coppington and Warwick. So, early in 1856 the building was started and the foundation plate in the porch reads:

> *This stone was laid, July the 24th, 1856, by Margaret Willoughby de Broke, who founded, erected and endowed this Church at her own expense in the devout hope that it might tend to the glory of God.*
>
> *'Mine House shall be called a House of Prayer for all people.' Isaiah 56:7.*

The building was completed in just over four years, and was consecrated on 23 August 1860, the dedication being to Saint Margaret by the wish of the Bishop of Saint Asaph.

The Bishop on the occasion of the consecration took the first verse of Psalm 103 as his text for the dedication sermon; 'Praise the Lord O My Soul; and all that is within me, Praise His Holy Name.' He went on to say 'No one can doubt how fully I partake in the expression of the words of the text, of the joy which arises in my own breast when I say "Praise the Lord O My Soul, and all that is within me, Praise His Holy Name."'

There is an amazing richness of design about the church and we wonder if some of the external and internal carving could be equalled today. Its finely built tower and delicately carved and graceful spire can be seen for miles in every direction and it provides an outstanding landmark of never-failing attractiveness.

The spire rises to a height of 202 feet. Its four traceried windows, bands of ornamental tracery, the carved portraits at every corner of the four pinnacles or finials and the finely worked flying buttresses make this graceful spire unique.

The church is in the Decorated Gothic style. It consists of chancel, nave, north and south aisles and a small octagonal vestry at the angle of the chancel and north aisle.

As you approach **the main entrance at the west,** note the finely designed **circular window,** over which is carved the Bodelwyddan Coat of Arms and on either side the portraits of Baron and Lady Willoughby de Broke. The basic design of the window is that of Solomon's seal, the Jewish symbol for God, sometimes used. At the western entrance are two nooks of polished Aberdeen granite. These bits of Scotland are

Left: *the nave, looking east*

Left: carved oak pulpit depicting Our Lord and Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
Right: splendidly carved oak lectern

placed there to remind us that the first Bishop of Asaph, Saint Kentigern, came from, and was buried in Scotland. In the porch or ante-church are two niches having stained windows; the one in the south representing Saint Kentigern, the northern window that of Saint Margaret.

The Nave

The nave is of generous proportions, having five bays, and the pillars are singular shafts of Belgian red marble each measuring 6′4″ by 2′4″ on bases of native stone. (The dual pillars at the western entrance of the nave are of Anglesey marble.) The capitals are of richly carved stone having in their largely varied designs the passion flower, leek, thistle, shamrock, Tudor rose, oak and ivy leaves and so on. These are capped by a finely moulded abacus of marble, giving an effect that is not repeated in any church of comparable size in existence.

Above the pillars in the spandrils are smaller pillars of Belgian red marble based on richly carved corbels and if these are looked at closely they will also reveal the initial letters of the names of Henry Peyto Willoughby de Broke and Margaret Willoughby de Broke, thus quietly, but indelibly, impressing the memorial character of the church, for there is no tablet or other writing in the church stating specifically that it was built as a memorial.

The hammer-beam roof with its arched principals and collars and cusped spandrils is lighted with a clerestory of small trefoiled openings and by lucernes at a higher point. Trefoil ornamentation was much used in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. There is not a single screw or nail in the construction of the whole roof. Every junction of the timbers is secured by pegs.

The chancel and **sanctuary** steps and flooring are of Sicilian marble and the roof is of oak formed into square panels by moulded ribs, with rosettes and bosses of various design at the intersections. The roof principals are carried by double and triple wall shafts of rich red Griotte marble with narrow lengths or fillets of Kilkenny black marble in each hollow and the capitals are of stone carved in the thirteenth-century French Gothic pattern. On the walls of the three sides are ogee crocheted canopies supported by shafts of French marble (Languedoc) on bases of Dorset marble (Purbeck).

In the **chancel** the canopies are of Caen stone and the panels are of veined stone, the capitals are of white alabaster from Derbyshire. In the **sanctuary**, the canopies are of alabaster and the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Apostles' Creed are written in gold letters upon panels of Povey marble.

Altogether there are fourteen varieties of marble in this church.

The Windows

The windows are of very good and interesting glass. In 1946 Dr I.D. Kendrick of the British Museum made a coloured film of some of the windows, particularly of the work of the Irishman O'Connor, who was perhaps the best known of the glass painters who took part in the great revival of the stained glass industry that began in the 1840s, and in the judgment of critics, the Bodelwyddan windows are important dated examples of O'Connor's work at its finest.

These windows are (1) the East Window; (2) the Nativity Windows; (3) the Crucifixion Window; (4) the Ascension Window; (5) the window in the south west of the chancel. Other windows by O'Connor are (6) the small circular window in the north-east of the nave; (7) the large circular West Window in the tower and (8) the Armorial Window in the south east of the nave.

The centre window in the north of the

chancel is a superb work. It depicts Our Lord teaching the lesson of the lilies of the field. This has no artist's signature but there is strong reason to believe that it is the work of Burne-Jones, the celebrated artist of the Pre-Raphaelite School. The other stained windows in the nave are family memorials painted by T.F. Curtis.

The window in the south-west of the nave is brilliantly coloured. The faces of the feminine characters were taken by the artist from life or from portraits. This is probably the finest example of the work of T.F. Curtis.

The Lectern

The lectern is exquisitely carved; it represents an eagle perched on the summit of a rock with both wings outspread. The wings and all the feathers are delicately carved. The rock is a weather-worn projecting crag and in the fissures are carved violets, foxgloves, bluebells, mosses and other wild flowers, all very finely wrought. Beside being a wonderful wood-carver, its creator was obviously a keen student of botany. Around the base is inscribed 'To the glory of God and the memory of Sir Hugh Williams, third Baronet of Bodelwyddan, by his children. May the 10th, 1876.' This is a very fine memorial to a worthy man. It is the work of T.H. Kendall, of Warwick, who was a superb craftsman. Some of his work is at Sandringham and he carved the twenty-two panels that adorn the walls of the Members' Dining Room of the House of Commons. His work is also to be seen in the art galleries of Birmingham and Coventry.

First, he made a clay model of this lectern, and then spent about six thousand hours in carving. The cost was £600.

The Pulpit

During the last century, the number of fine workers in wood carving has steadily declined, and the church now seems to be the main sanctuary of the art. In St Margaret's we are glad to be the possessors of some of the finest examples of English wood carving of the nineteenth century.

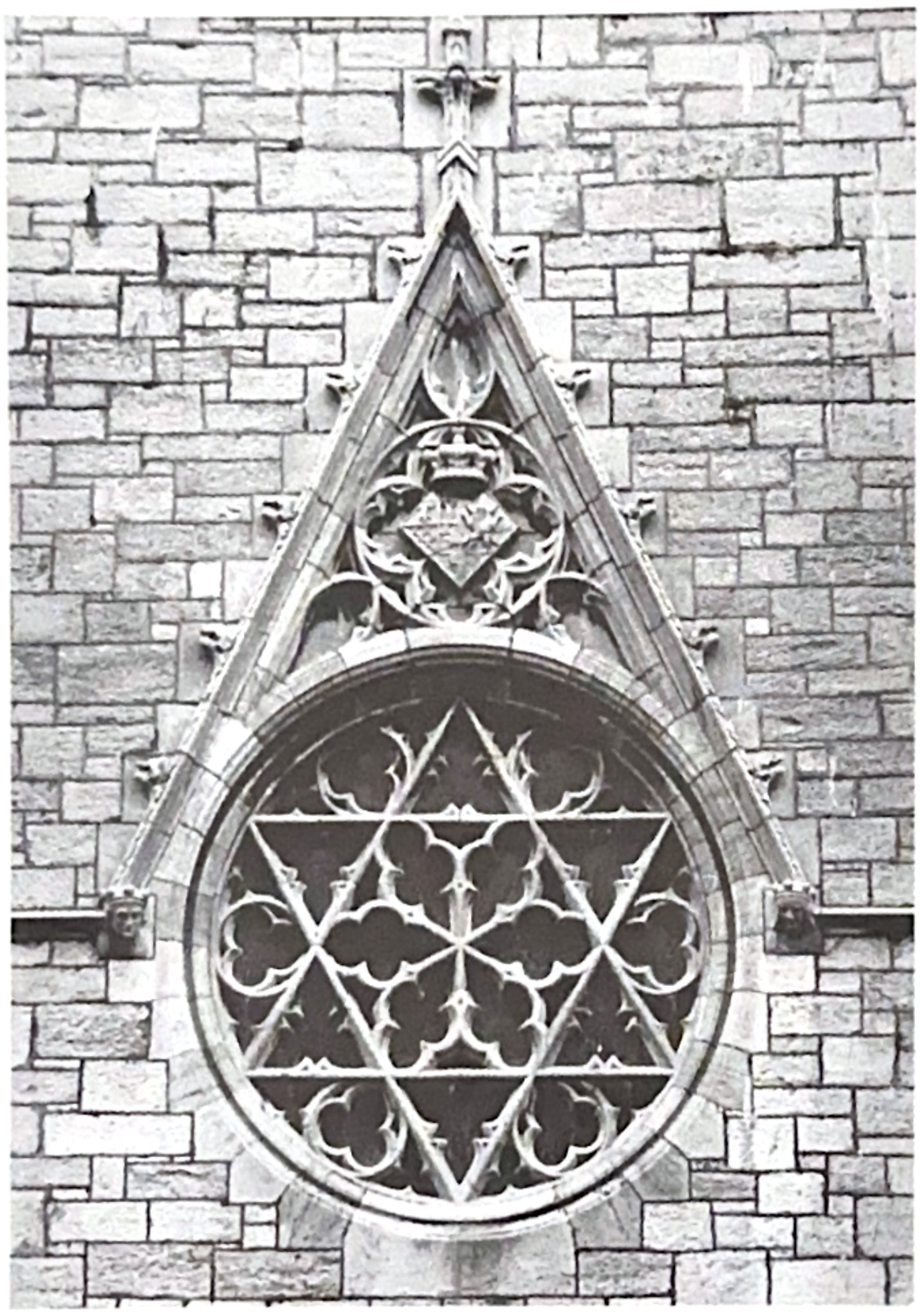
The pulpit is an outstanding example of the art. It represents in five panels Our Lord and Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and these are supported by five figures of angels carved in relief. Thomas Earp, its creator, was a Londoner who was apprenticed to a firm of wood carvers in the south-east of London in the early 1840s. Unfortunately, all records of his were lost in the bombing in 1941 of the premises he originally founded.

The pulpit was a gift of Emma and Harriet, two sisters of Lady Margaret Willoughby de Broke, who were very generous in their interest and support of the new parish church.

The Font

The font is original in artistic form. It represents two sisters, children of Sir Hugh Williams, who was the donor of the font; the elder, Mary Charlotte Lucy, is kneeling, holding a shell, the younger, Arabella Antonia, stands beside her. The work is of exquisite Carrara marble and was executed by Peter Hollins, who was of a Birmingham family, all noted in the arts. In 1822, Hollins went to London to train under Sir Francis Leggatt Chantrey and was with him for some time. At one time he had a studio in Old Bond Street and in 1833 an exhibition of work was held which led to the comment of him, 'There is not a young artist of the present day whose efforts deserve greater encouragement. Every subject undertaken by him is executed with great care and fidelity and in a most refined

Left: Memorial Chapel
Right: font of Carrara marble depicting two nieces of Lady Margaret Willoughby de Broke



taste.' A more recent critic, Maurice H. Grant, writes of him, 'Peter Hollins is one of the leaders in our School of Sculpture, and is insufficiently remembered as such.' We agree that the name of Peter Hollins is not remembered as it should be, but we know that his creation of this font is greatly appreciated by thousands that visit the church very year. The font cost £300.

The war memorial, the altar, reredos and panels in the south-east of the nave were designed by Caroe (a distinguished Ecclesiastical Architect) as a memorial to the parishioners who paid the supreme sacrifice in the 1914-1918 War.

The pipe organ is in the west gallery and was made by John Cowin of Liverpool.

In **the belfry** are eight bells of superb tone, cast by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry of Mears and Steinbank, their total weight being 63 cwts. 1 qr. 7 lbs. Both the organ and bells were given by Lady Margaret Willoughby de Broke, who also left an endowment fund to help pay for the repairs to the fabric. This fund, though, in this inflationary period is unfortunately very inadequate to meet our costs.

In **the churchyard** in the north-west is the family vault and near this are the graves of other members of the family, among them that of Watkin Herbert Williams, second son of Sir Hugh Williams, Vicar of this parish from 1872 to 1892, then Dean of Saint Asaph and later Bishop of Bangor, and at the head of his grave are buried his two sisters, Mary Charlotte Lucy and Arabella Antonia, who were the two figured for the font.

In the north-east of the churchyard is the grave of Elizabeth Jones, the mother of Sir H.M. Stanley, the famous explorer, and in the south are 117 war graves, 83 Canadian and 34 British.

Until 1975 various regiments had been stationed at Kinmel Park Military Camp in the parish, and stationed in the camp during the years 1918-1919 was No. 9 Canadian Hospital.

Questions are often asked about the graves of the Canadian soldiers in our churchyard. Over the years rumours grew that they had been courtmartialled and shot for mutiny following riots. However, thanks to the efforts of Mr J.P. Kent Q.C., of Toronto, these rumours can be dispelled. Mr Kent undertook months of

Top left: *war graves of British and Canadian soldiers*
Centre left: *circular window over the main entrance*
Bottom left: *finely carved gargoyle*

research in Britain and Canada to clear the memory of the Canadian soldiers who died while stationed at Kinmel Camp within the parish.

Mr Kent, while on a visit to Wales, was shocked to hear a tour guide say the graves at Bodelwyddan contained the bodies of 83 Canadian soldiers sentenced to death after rioting in their camp at Kinmel near the village. He decided to make further inquiries on his return to Canada.

Back in Toronto Mr Kent wrote to the defence department and was referred to the Veterans' Affairs department. They in turn referred him to the Imperial War Graves Commission, who suggested he should get in touch with the defence department. After more correspondence, the defence department assured Mr Kent it would investigate. The results of the investigation confirmed that there was no truth in the original rumour.

It seems the rumour started this way: a staging camp was established near Bodelwyddan for soldiers awaiting return home to Canada after the 1918 armistice. In March 1919, a mêlée developed among men restless from repeated sailing delays. In the mêlée three soldiers were killed and two died later of injuries. Courts martial were held and some detentions ordered.

While 83 Canadians (according to Ottawa records) were buried in the churchyard, with the exception of those who died from injuries received in the demonstration, all the Canadian servicemen buried in the churchyard died from natural causes, mainly pneumonia and influenza.

Around the churchyard is a ha-ha, which permits a fine view of the church from any angle.

In **the 1861 Census**, the population of the parish was 630; in the last Census, it was about 1,200.

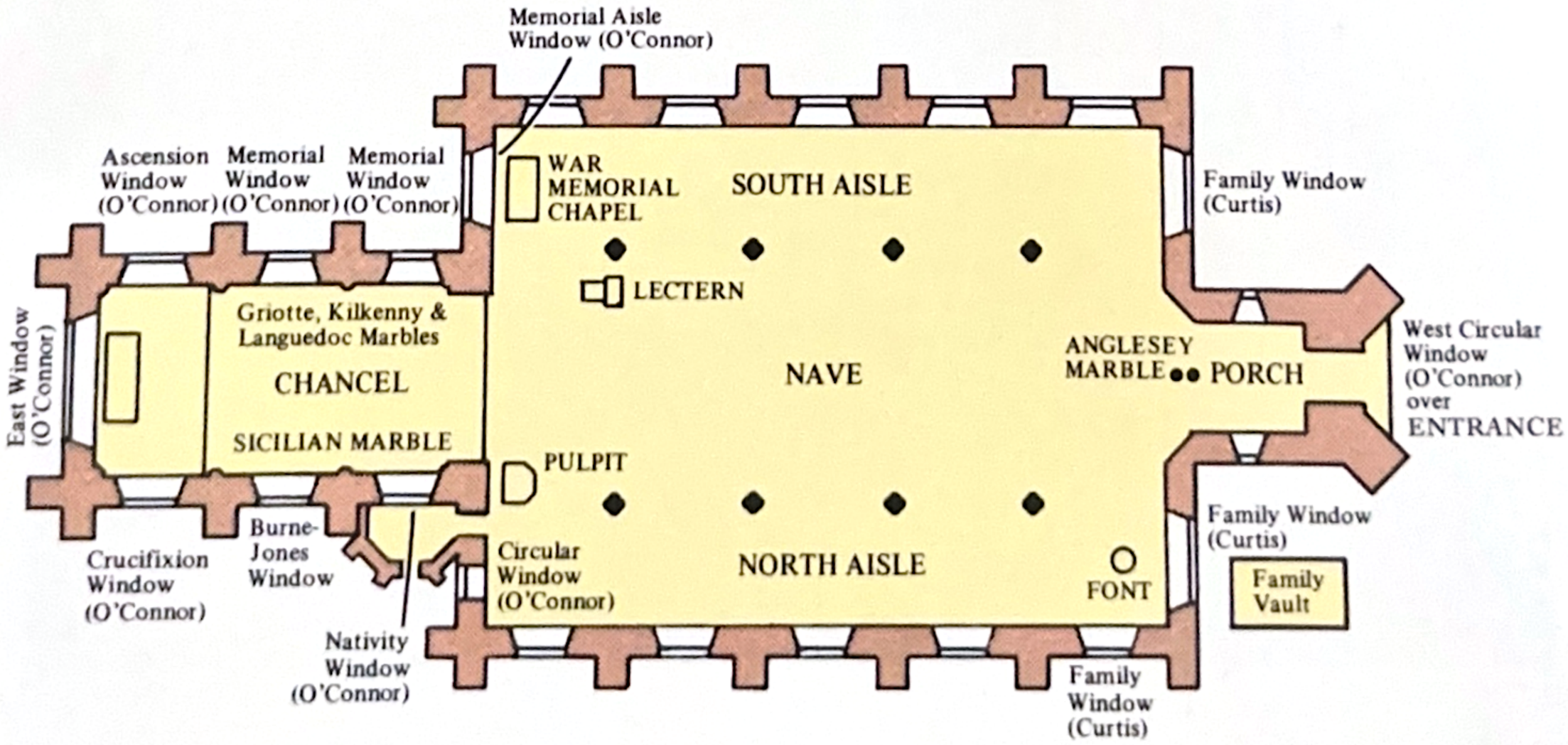
Bodelwyddan Castle, the former home of the Williams family, was taken over in 1920 by Lowther College, an independent girl's school. When the school closed down a few years ago, the castle was bought by Clwyd County Council, who have now developed it as a cultural and educational centre. It also houses the National Portrait Gallery. The remaining farms and dwellings of the Bodelwyddan Estate were sold off in 1930.

Church Restoration

We would like to record our thanks to Mr P.M. Bartosch, of Messrs Roiser, Whitestone and Bartosch, Chartered Architects and Surveyors, Cheltenham, for his careful supervision of the fabric of the church. In recent years, under the direction of Mr Bartosch, over £30,000 has been spent in essential repairs and restoration of the stonework, so that this precious heritage can be preserved for future generations.

Vicars of Bodelwyddan

David Williams	1860 - 1865
William H. Lewis	1865
W. Rees Williams	1865 - 1872
Watkin Herbert Williams	1872 - 1892
Owen Jones	1892 - 1900
Trevor Owen	1900 - 1916
J.H. Hope	1916 - 1923
Daniel Davies	1923 - 1925
Walter D. Williams	1925 - 1931
W. Griffiths Williams	1931 - 1939
John E. Morgan	1940 - 1954
D.R. Griffiths	1954 - 1975
D. Pryce Morris	1976 - 1979
Raymond V. Byles	1980



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